

Interview with the Author

An Honors Thesis (ART 480)

by

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Abstract

A change has come to popular media. Every day, we are digitally invited into the homes and lives of the creators whose work we love. We are pushed to become attached to them as we become attached to their work. How can we as viewers healthily interact with the creators whose work we enjoy, and how can we as creators healthily interact with the people that enjoy our work? How intimate can we become? How intimate should we become? What harm can we do to each other? *Interview with the Author* is a visual novel that asks its players to engage with these questions while taking the role of web columnist Reed Knightly as they interview science fiction author Arthur Wright. Stemming from a semester-long inquiry into the subject of parasocial relationships, *Death of the Author*, and the intersection of the two theories, *Interview* lets its players can ask Arthur a variety of questions related to topics like their professional work, their fandom, and their time as a fanfiction writer. The answers they receive dynamically shift depending on the player's perceived interest or disinterest in parasocial connections between authors, readers and fictional characters. *Interview* represents a continued exploration of the subject of communication in my work, and of the way individuals and constructs build connections with one another.

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Process Analysis Statement

This project went through at least three distinct phases over the course of the past semester. The first step was essentially pre-production: approximately two months of research and brainstorming. At this initial stage, the final project was pictured as a small exhibition of about half a dozen individual artworks related to a single overarching theme. An essential part of this process was a review of my past work as a student of intermedia art. Common themes were apparent: an interest in existentialism and in storytelling, but also in my own thought processes. Whether presented literally or in the form of an essay, a significant percentage of my undergraduate output could be summarized as conversations with myself.

My most recent video essay, *I Don't Want to Lie: Word Vomit in Three Parts*, touched on all of these motifs, and became the foundation for much of this thesis project. That video was also where the technique for generating pixelated images with limited color palettes was developed — although it would not be implemented in my thesis project for several more steps. Thematically, a key inspiration for all subsequent stages of production was the anxiety that uncompromised communication is impossible, that we can only interact with the constructs of one another that we generate.

I began to synthesize that theory with *Death of the Author* and parasocial interaction theory, but I struggled to keep my thoughts straight. Parsing which themes of prior work I wanted to pursue, which political events I wished to address, which elements of contemporary culture were relevant, etc., was proving to be a monumental task. To try and bring order to this line of thinking, I began to make concept maps that served as a way to encapsulate all the interconnected ideas, themes, events and techniques that were swirling around in my brain. How effective this tactic proved to be is debatable, but it did mark the beginning of the second phase of production: hypertext literature, or: my brief stint as Daedalus.

Since I was trapped in a web, a labyrinth of ideas, it seemed only appropriate that my final product should impart the same sensation to its viewers. I began researching the basics of web design, thinking I could create a hypertext maze with pages and routes designed to evoke different ideas, their literal connections meant to highlight their thematic connections. Just before spring break, I presented to a small group of mentors and trusted peers a website plan composed of twenty-three individual pages, about a dozen of which were in some state of completion. The

reception was mixed to negative. My technical skills were extremely limited given my near-zero history with web design, and the work demonstrated a clear lack of connection to the history of internet art. It was barely functional and, to make matters worse, I had driven myself to an unsustainable level of sleep debt to produce it. However, not all my work at this stage was without merit.

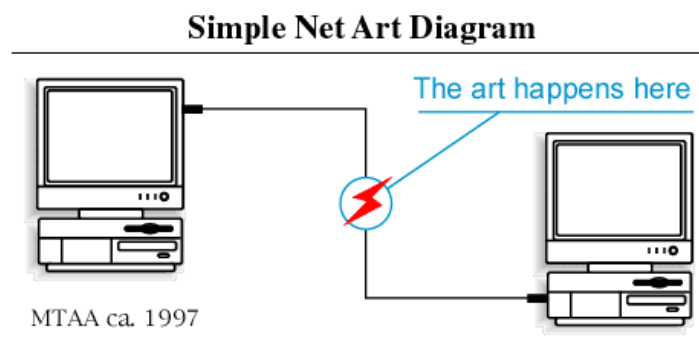
At this same mid semester review, I also presented a new video installation I had produced as part of an intermedia studio class: an untitled multi-channel work that, in several ways, brought me closer to the idea that would become *Interview with the Author*. This installation took my tendency to engage viewers with the conversations I have with myself and enhanced it. The viewer was prompted to read half of a conversation from a teleprompter while a recording of myself framed as a video call delivered the other half of the conversation. Additionally, the written conversation that the viewer took part of was between an author and a reader, with the latter (played by the viewer) given the option to choose which dialogue they wanted to read out loud. While the author could not react, being a prerecorded video, the script was made flexible enough that their responses were appropriate to either potential dialogue choice. The conversation focused on the theme of *Death of the Author*, and emphasized the constructed nature of the prerecorded half of the conversation in order to highlight the similarly constructed nature of the viewer's perception of the artist behind the work. Due to unfortunate technical limitations, however, the installation was never fully resolved, but it nonetheless represented progress towards a much more cohesive vision for this project.

My mid semester evaluation occurred shortly before spring break and, following the mixed reception of my work, I spent a significant part of that time writing and reevaluating my thesis. At this point, I began to recognize the themes I wanted to explore, but the method still eluded me. I considered some of the advice given to me by Dr. Matt Mullins, one of the people kind enough to offer feedback at my evaluation. In describing hypothetical forms for the project, he maintained that the best method would be to allow the viewer to engage with the subject matter on their own terms, my project merely providing the space for that engagement. I also began to research web art history, hoping to find inspiration as well as a general understanding of the artistic world I was about to enter.

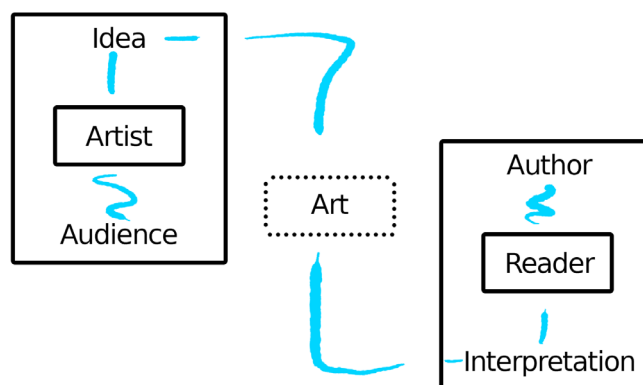
A variety of media served to inspire *Interview*'s production, and while not all of it was first encountered during this period of hyper focus during spring break, that was the point where things began to crystallize.

Without a doubt, the greatest inspiration for this project was the documentary series *FAKE FRIENDS* — produced by video essayist Shannon Strucci (A.K.A. StrucciMovies) — which addresses parasociality in contemporary culture, especially internet culture. *EPISODE TWO: parasocial hell*, was particularly impactful, as it tackles the subject of internet entertainment and entertainers (especially let's players like Seán McLoughlin — Jacksepticeye — and Mark Fischbach — Markiplier) and the way that audience desire for parasocial connection and creator interest in feeding that desire have formed an environment detrimental to all involved.

Interview was not born of a singular idea, however. It emerged from the intersection of multiple interests: parasociality, yes, but also *The Death of the Author* and the overarching topic of the failure to communicate. Attempts to unify these themes, and to build a framework that demonstrated the interplay between them took no small degree of inspiration from *Simple Net Art Diagram* by MTAA (M. River & T. Whid Art Associates), a piece I may have first encountered during a sophomore-year computer art class but rediscovered over spring break. The famous flowchart posits that the eponymous art occurs at the point of communication between two computers. *And Everything In Between*, the unified diagram that eventually resulted from my investigations, owes much of its broader structure to the *Net Art Diagram*, but applies it to all forms of mediated communication (that is to say: to all forms of communication) and uses Roland Barthes' *The Death of the Author* as the starting point for its labels.



Simple Net Art Diagram, MTAA, 1997



And Everything In Between, Noah Davis-Cheshire, 2020

The Reader and the Artist are human beings, trapped in their own minds. In attempting to speak to the Audience they have constructed, the Artist turns an Idea into Art, which a Reader may Interpret and ascribe the message that they've interpreted to the Author that they have constructed. At no point does genuine communication happen here, but it could be argued that something real is still made: the Art between them is everything.

Death of the Author's influence on this project sprang not from Barthes' original work, I am ashamed to admit, but from a video essay on the topic released by Lindsay Ellis. Ellis' video, which is titled nearly identically to Barthes' essay, investigates the subject matter with a particular eye for how it arises in contemporary reader/viewer discourse around problematic creators. She looks at different popular writers and considers how they conceive their own authorial power and the relative power of their readership. A broad array of perspectives emerge, many of which inspired certain elements of *Interview with the Author* (in fact, three of the authors highlighted in her video — John Greene, Anne Rice, and Jo Rowling — get mentioned or alluded to in the finished project). For the sake of thoroughness, of course, I also read Barthes' original essay. It was in considering both of these works that I recognized how the idea of the Author as a construct built by the reader resonated with similar ideas in my aforementioned video essay, *I Don't Want to Lie: Word Vomit in Three Parts*.

The idea of making *Interview with the Author* a visual novel, was partially suggested by Angelo Washko's *The Game: The Game*, a piece I had not encountered prior to spring break. In order to facilitate discussion of pickup artist culture and tactics, Washko selected a genre famous for reducing complex human relationships to a series of ~correct~ dialogue choices. Making the viewer the would-be passive person/object that the men around them attempt to seduce inverts

the typical dating simulator formula and highlights how disturbing and dehumanizing these tactics are. Given my own interest in exploring problematic relationships, as well as in framing that exploration as conversations the viewer/reader takes part in, leaving behind the HTML and building a visual novel made a lot of sense.

Thus began the third and final stage of production: writing a visual novel. Before sitting down to write out a script that personified the various ideas I wanted to explore, I had to make sure that I wasn't biting off more than I could chew — especially after having spent so much time trying to figure out web design and especially since I now had less than half a semester to complete the project. Fortunately, I was able to find a robust, free and highly accessible tool for producing just this kind of work: Ren'Py. This visual novel engine provides most of the framework for a game, and simply requires that developers using it master some basic scripting syntax — leaving the majority of production time to be spent on the writing, imagery and pacing. This efficiency and accessibility was vital to the project's success.

Between the latter half of spring break and the start of April, my efforts were focused on drafting and redrafting the script. I decided that the framework of an interview would be an effective and simple way to keep the subjects I wanted to discuss front and center. Additionally, the idea of a hidden alignment score that kept track of the player's interests and adjusted the author's responses appropriately was there from just about the beginning, as was the idea of a self-insert character that brought attention to my own role as the game's author and artist.

Programming and production of imagery didn't start until the beginning of April. Even before I began gathering character and background images, I knew that I wanted to use the same tool for generating pixelated footage that I used in *I Don't Want to Lie: Word Vomit in Three Parts*. In that video, black and white pixelated footage served to highlight the mediation involved in conveying its central message. It would fulfill the same purpose in *Interview with the Author*. The effect was both aesthetically pleasing and, when used in place of the illustrated figures typical to the visual novel genre, slightly uncanny. These images were created through the use of a Nintendo 3DS, specifically with the software Flipnote Studio 3D. While primarily an animation program, Flipnote allows users to take photographs with the 3DS' camera that are then rendered using the program's extremely limited color palette and resolution. To make an image of one of the characters, I would shoot a high resolution picture of myself on my phone camera, photograph that picture using Flipnote, and export the file to Photoshop where I could crop out

the background. Background images were made using a similar technique, although those began as stock imagery, rather than original photographs. Additionally, I often blended color and black and white Flipnote images of background art to create an engaging selective coloration effect.

In keeping with its connection to web art, and in order to make it as widely accessible as possible, the completed game was exported for the web and set up as its own standalone website. The framework for this process was set up almost entirely by Ren'Py, only requiring that I find a company to host the site. The added advantage of this method of distribution is that minor updates — typically fixes to typos or scripting errors — could quickly and quietly be made at any time.

Interview with the Author's production was a roller coaster. By this, I do not simply mean that it was a bunch of rickety ups and downs (although that would be a fair assessment). This project began with a long, anxious, build up of energy that, once released, produced an experience unlike anything I had encountered previously. The sheer scale of it is far beyond the rest of my undergraduate output. Even though it is effectively the video game equivalent of flash fiction, *Interview's* script is still composed of over 2600 lines of code. Additionally, not only did I use the basics of HTML, CSS and Ren'py scripting over the course of this project, I arranged the hosting of a website for the project. A web-compatible build of *Interview with the Author* was officially released on this site in late April, and can be accessed at <http://interviewwiththeauthor.com/>. The use of conversation, the interest in storytelling and storytellers, the existential anxieties, and the interconnected way individuals, constructs and concepts relate to one another, these elements were all pushed to a new level of conceptual depth. *And Everything in Between*, a cornerstone of *Interview's* philosophy, is quite literally my own personal communication theory.

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Digital Supplements

Interview with the Author can be accessed at <http://interviewwiththeauthor.com/>.